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Scopophobia

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SCOPOPHOBIA

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SCOPOPHOBIA

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Preface

I set out to write an essay three years ago that started with the line "I always find God in the bathroom—don't ask me why," which is entirely true and says so much while explaining so little. Within a page and a half I briefly introduced a scene, a memory, where I had sequestered myself in a toilet stall in the bathroom on my sorority's dorm floor at Eastern Kentucky University. I mentioned the scenario—I was hiding from a serial rapist who, for some reason, decided I'd be a good target—in just a few paragraphs and moved on as if it had the paltry significance of last week's soggy newspaper lying under the dog bowl. After all, I only wrote it because it was a required exercise in my first graduate writing class; I was going to write my thesis in fiction.

Ha.

I felt compelled to narrow the topics in my essay down (at my professor's behest but also, I now admit, for myself), and while many things in life affected me in one way or another, the most memorable—and most traumatizing—is this: I was hunted by a serial rapist with HIV who was so violent that his victims usually had to have more than one major surgery in order to undo the damage to their uterus, or they had to have it removed, and in order to get away, I locked myself in a toilet stall and prayed he wouldn't find me, even though I knew he had cameras hidden all over the place. It was like the movie *Saw*, only I was living it and I didn't have to torture anyone else in order to save myself. He didn't need any help in that arena; he already had my neurons in knots. I rarely took my eyes off the cracks in the door, hoping I wouldn't see his face through them. To this day, there are habits I formed in those months that I may never shake, and I'm okay with that. For instance, I will always look over my shoulders in a

parking lot, will always carry my keys a certain way in case I need to fight. I will always remain intensely private with some information about myself. I will always maintain my option to hide. Scopophobia, in fact, is defined in the medical field as a fear of being seen or stared at, thus my choice of title.

During my undergraduate years I was introduced to captivity narratives, and they enthralled me. One of the primary characteristics of the narratives I read was an exploration of the suffering the authors endured and how it affected them, how they were separated from society, attacked, tormented physically and mentally, how it transformed them, and ultimately how and why they were able to return to the life from which they'd been taken, changed and yet the same as before. They wrote not just for the entertainment value of the reader but because the authors—the people who lived through the emotional and physical torture—needed to record the experience in order to know what to think about it, or if they should think about it at all. Traditionally, most of the captives claim restoration to salvation through faith in God, who helped them endure their suffering with hope. While this whole project began with that idea in mind, I have veered away from the idea of religious salvation and have dealt more with character traits within myself that may—or may not—have served as the foundation of my own fortitude.

Aside from my fascination with captivity and its repercussions, I wanted to write my truth, which is different from the "Truth" because it's what I remember happening, which, as anyone who has studied memory knows, may not be exactly what happened, or if it is it may not be all the facts. Humans are selective creatures. Our memories are recorded based on emotional reaction; who's to say our emotions are always accurate? Memoirists invite their readers to assist with the journey, to rummage through the

darkness of it and find what meaning they can. In her short memoir, *Lying*, Lauren Slater's invitation to readers is "Enter...lostness with me. Live in the place I am, where the view is murky, where the connecting bridges and orienting maps have been surgically stripped away" (163). Some facts are missing because they are deliberately omitted or because the authors don't know them, and both author and reader are left to make sense of what memories there are if they can. While I didn't write a traditional captivity narrative or a full-length memoir, I did set out to explore my own situation by recounting snippets of my own suffering, the scenes my memory keeps boxed in the attic. In order to do so, I had to study not only captivity narratives but theory, including and especially Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, focusing on how the body acts as both a physical and psychological surface on which pain can be—and is—inscribed, some psychological analysis of stalker personalities, technology, etc. I had to relive my experience and evaluate what changes it caused in my life.

For example, when I was younger, as I would fall asleep, some of the muscles in my body would twitch, which meant I was almost to the point where I could sleep through a tornado (and did a couple of times). I called them the "death twitches," because my mother always told me when I slept deeply I was dead to the world. I haven't felt those twitches since the beginning of my freshmen year of college. I usually don't sleep for more than a couple of hours at a time without waking up, and wake up at the slightest noise, a sign of suffering from post-trauma stress. In her memoir *Lucky*, Alice Sebold quotes a passage out of Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* about people who suffer from PTSD and physical characteristics that mark their condition.

They do not have a normal “baseline” level of alert but relaxed attention. Instead, they have an elevated baseline of arousal: their bodies are always on the alert for danger. They also have an extreme startle response to unexpected stimuli...People with post-traumatic stress disorder take longer to fall asleep, are more sensitive to noise, and awaken more frequently during the night than ordinary people. Thus traumatic events appear to recondition the human nervous system. (239)

I hadn’t thought of the death twitches in a long time, probably since the last time I’d had them, but after reading that passage, I realized I hadn’t experienced them since my first year at EKU, and I began to wonder what sort of experience might cause me to display signs and symptoms of PTSD—I mention a psychologist friend later who wants to diagnose me with it but can’t because I won’t let him—but doesn’t break my spirit enough to slow me down.

I still occasionally have the feeling of prey being hunted, twinges of uncertainty and hyper-awareness. The way I understand it, part of the attraction to victims for a narcissistic stalker is control over their reactions: he likes to play cat and mouse. Mine sent me a card, called on a regular basis, left hints, then disappeared for a few weeks, only to restart the cycle. One article I read about this shifting prototype explained it as a form of simultaneous psychological sadism and affection substitution.

[S]talkers who deliberately leave signs of their presence or permit themselves to be seen unexpectedly by their victims may be viewed as engaging in a form of emotional sadism. In such cases, the sudden terror induced in the victims can provide sadistic gratification to the stalker and also maintain a paranoid bond, in which the victim’s hypervigilance for

further sightings serves as a perverse substitute for affection and attachment. (Wilson 145-6)

By knowing what strategies were used to hunt me (and it's still so disturbing to think of myself as a hunted animal), I could pinpoint the changes in the situation as they occurred mentally in the hunter as well as within the microcosm he tried to create in order to control me. I recreated his Panopticon on paper and relived it in order to learn, move forward and record. Another thing I learned is this: I could never understand my story until I had first written it, not as the stalker had tried to create it, but as I remember it, because in the end it is only the memory that matters, the memory that happened. Reality is fiction.

I begin my story in September of my freshmen year of college—September 11th, 2001, to be more precise: a time and event that will be familiar to readers. The ideal reader will be one who can read not only my reactions to a nationally catastrophic event but also between the lines on the page as my story develops, delving into the personal reality I've conveyed. There are limitations: I leave out facts that might feel pertinent to the situation. For example, what happened to the stalker after he got caught? How, exactly, did I find out about the situation? What else was going on in my life at the time, during the year and few months I was dealing with trying to act normal when everything that was "normal" was false? All I can say is that I've probably deleted and thrown away more than what I have left because it isn't necessary to meticulously chronicle each hour and each thought I had. I have shortened the experience and confined it to its culmination, but the ideal reader will understand that this is only the tip of the iceberg—the sharpest, most clearly discernible part, but only a fraction of the entire episode. I

entered the bathroom stall at the end of one phase of my life and walked out of it to begin a new one.

This is the chrysalis.

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SCOPOPHOBIA

Kristin Eller December 2011 65 Pages

Directed by: Dale Rigby, Kelly Reames, and Wes Berry

Department of English Western Kentucky University

The purpose of this essay is to focus on my past reactions to trauma and childhood experiences in order to explore my current psychological make-up as a surviving victim of voyeurism and as an object of fixation and intended victim of a violent, serial stalker and rapist. It is a creative work of nonfiction in the style of a short memoir of self-captivity, encompassing events from the first two years of my college career as an undergraduate and tying them to memories from childhood that helped develop my instincts and self-efficacy. The childhood memories and moments of self-captivity seem at first unrelated but share common psychological themes, and by incorporating the confessional conventions of captivity narratives with the ever-growing style of the situational memoir, I am able to tie the two together to create a story of survival and restoration. I do so using a series of flashbacks to early childhood juxtaposed with scenes from my freshmen and sophomore year of college told in the present tense, all of which lead to the realization of my life as I live it now, both as a reflection of experiences and as an act defying them. In other words, this essay is the culmination of researching dealing with stalking techniques, modern-day punitive and trauma theory, literary tradition, and personal experience, all used to explain one thing: why I'm like this.

It's a clear morning in September, unusually chilly, and while the grass glistens with reflected sunlight, illuminating the summer trees from below so that it appears they have no shadows, there's a slight scent of autumn resonating in isolated patches here and there, a hint of spicy leaves coagulating in forgotten corners of the woods. I'm walking to my Enjoyment of Music class at Eastern Kentucky University, an easy class I chose to take as an elective because I knew I wouldn't have to study. Music is my first language. Plus, the professor gives out copies of the exam as the review, word for word, with the correct answers included, as long as you show up and sign the roster.

It's early, only around 8:45, but quieter than normal. I guess everyone is finally settled into their schedules now that the first three or four weeks of school are behind us. Still, I usually see at least one or two people crossing the ravine at the same time I am, but today I see no one. I'm the only person in the world, isolated in time and this grassy space.

I close my eyes against the sunlight and smell the air again, breathe in the ghost essence of fall, the way I used to breathe in the scent of my mother's make-up brushes on her vanity table as she'd brush my hair after scrubbing mud and leaves out of it in the tub. I think of home, of my little bedroom in a brick house on top of a hill, surrounded on three sides by trees. Now is the time of year when the windows in the house stay open and my room absorbs the clove and hickory smell of the wood stove downstairs in the morning that later mingles with the lemony zing of cut grass and late-summer storms. I put my hands in the pockets of my red jacket and pull it closer around me, still soft from its tumble in Mom's dryer two days ago. The frayed bottoms of my jeans sweep the path, churning pebbles and dust to leave a trail of scuffs like paint-brushed waves in sand.

I look down the hill and across the flat of the ravine to the other side, watching yellow moths skip across the breeze. One is too close and is thrust at me by a sudden gust of wind, tangling in the long, brown strands of my hair. I take a minute to talk to God in my head and tell him how pretty it all is, a habit I developed as a child when I would lag behind my brother hiking through the woods and stop too long to pick wildflowers in bunches of purple and yellow that I thought I might take home to my mom. They never made it that far. I always got too distracted to hang onto them. One time I asked my brother, Josh, why he never bothered to circle back to make sure I was okay, and he told me that as long as he could hear me talking, he knew I was fine, and I talked all the time, that he wouldn't lose me because everywhere I went there was a trail of flowers and leaves scattered behind me, the rustle of old sticks and leaves as I marched onward down whatever path I decided to take without worrying about snakes or spiders or anything else I should worry about, that he didn't understand how I wasn't afraid after all the stories Daddy had told us. He said it was a wonder God never told me to shut up and be still so He could get a word in edgewise I talked and moved around so much. I told Josh I talked to God for just that reason; he was a heck of a lot nicer than my own brother and he didn't mind that I wanted to look around. I told him the snakes and spiders and I had an understanding with each other: I wouldn't bother them if they wouldn't bother me, but if they started to bother me, we were going to have a problem, because I'd stomp their brains out. I've never been able to tolerate a bully.

In my peripheral vision I see a chipmunk dart across the shadow of a tree, and I watch it burrow between two exposed roots. It's a good climbing tree, the lowest branches high enough off the ground that I would probably have to run and jump to catch

hold around them and swing my legs up, but I could do it. I wonder if the groundskeepers frown upon tree-climbing here. It wouldn't hurt anything, and there are several trees that would be perfect to sit in while I watch the world turn. I think I have my knife in my backpack. I should cut off a few small branches to take to my room so it'll smell like the outdoors instead of the old pizza boxes left in the hall.

I check my watch to make sure I'm not late for class, but no, I should walk in within five minutes of starting time. I left my dorm room over fifteen minutes ago to make sure I'd have enough time to make it across campus to class after having to run down all ten flights of stairs because the elevators are out of order again. I'll probably be one of the last ones in the door before he locks it.

The absolute stillness is unnerving.

I speed up, almost jogging up the sidewalk and over the next hill to the music building. Rushing through the door, the halls are almost empty, only one other student visible, stopped in the door of our classroom and staring up into the corner near the opposite door.

"Holy Shit," I hear him whisper as I come up behind him. I can't see what he sees, but everyone else in the room is staring dumbfounded at the TV in the corner in the direction he's looking.

He realizes that I'm behind him and we both hurry forward to find seats. I put my backpack down next to me and look up to see what's happening. The TV is turned to the news channel.

The World Trade Center is on fire. A plane has crashed into it.

As we watch, another plane suddenly glides into the picture and slices into the other tower. It doesn't look real. It's too much like Hollywood's perfect special effects. I think it must be a new movie trailer. One of the guys in class, the president of one of the fraternities, says it has to be a hoax that someone sent into the news channel, ruling out my movie trailer theory.

No one else speaks, allowing his disbelief to fall defunct on the beige floor tiles. His hypothesis sounds weaker and weaker the longer we watch the towers burn.

The professor addresses us without locking the door for the first time in the semester. "Do any of you have friends or family members who work at the Twin Towers?" he asks. No one responds.

He mutes the TV and tells us to clear our desks for the exam, telling us also that we will not be introduced to any new material today as he had previously planned. Considering the circumstances of the morning, he suggests we finish our exam and then pray. He had told us on the first day of class that he wasn't a particularly religious man, that he believed in music as a higher being rather than any God. But today, he says, we should all be praying for those people in the planes and towers and their loved ones, for the country at large.

I finish my test in less than fifteen minutes, answering all 100 questions and going back to make sure I didn't overlook any of them. Several people finish at the same time, so we line up single file to lay our tests on the professor's desk like a pile of giant white ashes crushed gently together on the corner. The stack isn't neat, and I notice in the haphazard pile that two or three people have left many questions blank, whole pages in fact, and possibly even the entire test in one case. They don't look down at the desk as

they add their exams to the pile, but instead file out of the room watching the TV until they can no longer see it, a walking sunflower patch swiveling to face the sun until it sets.

Crossing the ravine back toward the dorm, there are now a few other people on the paths, but it's still quiet. No one speaks. Their presence is marked only by the muffled staccato of their footsteps, the shuffle of sneakers on dirt paths.

The sun is shining. The birds are singing. The breeze is warmer now.

As I pass beside the outdoor amphitheater I see two or three students gathered at the fountain that runs parallel to the stage in front of the bottom row of the audience plateaus. They each have lit a votive candle, and they're floating them in the still water. By noon, there will be no more room for candles in the fountain, and they will be ablaze on the edges of the stage instead. They will be all colors and sizes, some unscented, and some eliciting a fragrance that will mix with all the others then rise to mingle with the oak and maple trees dotting the surrounding hills. Some of them will be provided by different campus organizations, but most of them will be removed from their hiding places in the dorm rooms—from desk drawers, closet cubbies, and sink cabinets—where they are considered contraband, and the RAs won't say anything as the students filter past them even though they know they've been hidden in rooms, some of them the secret causes of the constant fire drills at four in the morning. They have been called to a higher existence now.

People gather all day at the unannounced vigil, standing to the side and looking off in the distance or sitting quietly to watch the flames flicker and to hear the wicks sputter and gasp as they are consumed. Most of them burn out within a few hours, but there's always another to replace those. The ravine glows from within both day and night

for a week, even after the official service that is held on Thursday night, when everyone came to sing, pray, and sit in the damp grass instead of going downtown. The Police Corp students and the Fire and Safety students have arranged a charitable fund for the police men and women and firefighters who were called to ground zero, and for their families. They've raised more in two days than any other campus organization has ever raised. The Counseling center has been bombarded with students, and will continue to offer free counseling to anyone who wants it.

I think of Josh, a senior in the Police Administration program here at Eastern who has already been accepted into the Federal Police Corp training program upon his graduation in May, and of my stepbrother, John, who just joined the Marines and will now certainly be activated, and I wish they would both choose different careers somewhere in a small town far away from politics and world business.

I walk back up the ten flights of stairs in Clay Hall, my red jacket now tied around my waist and my mascara smudging from sweat so my eyes look greener, like the eyes of a black cat I used to have. I can hear my TV before I even open the old metal door to the stairwell. I see down to the end of the hall where my roommate, Jennifer, has the door propped open and half the hall crowded onto our futon to watch the footage on my twelve-inch TV where we usually stage MarioKart tournaments. She likes to call me "Dammit Kris" instead of my name and talks in run-on sentences.

"Dammit Kris, did you see this? I woke up right as you left and turned it on and Katie said I yelled so loud she thought I'd been stabbed so she came running and banging on the door and that woke everyone else up so we've been watching it and oh my god this is crazy! This is some crazy shit!" She has to yell because she's unofficially half deaf

(it's what I tell myself to make sense of her generally excessive life volume) and because the news channel is turned up to an alarming decibel level.

I walk under a tall girl's arm to get through the doorway. There are general murmurs of consensus from the other girls in the room after Jennifer's announcement, but after another half hour or so, they start to get up one by one to get ready for class. On Jennifer's way out she stops one more time to gape at the tiny screen where the towers are burning. As she lets the door slam behind her, I stop to mute the volume. When the door closes, the first tower falls, as if the noise of slamming metal catalyzes its implosion. I sit silently and watch as the second tower collapses in a shadowy miasma of gray dust and ash, and I fall asleep to the picture of a weeping, broken city. Our days of naïveté and innocence are done.

"The city is going to survive, we are going to get through it,
it's going to be a very, very difficult time. I don't think we yet know
the pain that we're going to feel when we find out who we lost,
but the thing we have to focus on now is getting this city through this,
and surviving
and being stronger for it."
--Rudolph Giuliani

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"Those who say they would rather fight to the death
than be raped are fools. I would rather be raped a thousand times.
You do what you have to."
--Alice Sebold, *Lucky*

I still picture her prone on the rain-damp, mud-crusted pavement, her tangled hair limp and crawling away as she tries to understand what just happened and why. She has been crying. There are dried, black riverbeds where mascara and eyeliner streaked, where they ran away when she couldn't. The streams flow down, sloping with the terrain of her cheeks then emptying into a common drainage basin in the puddle soaking her

shredded shirt and skewed skirt. But now her eyes are empty, vacant, framed by the mottled red and purple of tomorrow's black eye and bruised jawbone. The splintered frame of a busted window in an abandoned house.

She is breathing—alive—but the life-giving part of her is forever broken and ruined—dead—and she wishes the rest was, too: rendered null and void. Her shirt is cut open, her upper chest exposed to the glowing gaze of streetlights, her right arm useless and broken. But it doesn't matter, because she has lost the will to cover herself. At this point, it is already too late—too late to worry about who can see her. On her upper chest, under a film of rain and chill-dried sweat, is a tattoo-like etching done in black Sharpie of a shaky number six with an X over it. Next to it, centralized on her sternum, an angry, precise number five in a slightly larger, more exact script. It is circled, something he hasn't done before. The investigators will ask her later why he wrote them, and she will not know. She will know only that there are more than one of her—of us—and it wasn't supposed to be her time yet. He had told her that much, at least.

She doesn't call for help immediately because she is in shock, because help is what she'd called for before he lacerated her lip with his fist, before she'd tasted her own blood. Before he'd forced her down to the grime and grit, before stretching her limbs to the breaking point, before giving her HIV. Help is what she wanted before, and no one came then. Now it doesn't matter.

Nothing matters.

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Introversion: the state of or tendency toward being wholly
or predominantly concerned with and interested
in one's own mental life

I have always suffered from stage fright.

In a robust and boisterous family of singers and musicians vying valiantly for the spotlight or any form of attention they could get, I was hiding behind the tallest cousin, or sitting in the floor under the kitchen table while everyone else broke into random song—usually hymns, barbershop favorites, or show tunes—and each tried to blend in harmony while projecting their voice further into the room than everyone else's, winning the race to each ear. It was like spending holidays with a group of born-again Tony nominees.

It was exhausting.

My mother and her three sisters grew up as members of a barbershop quartet, their father having been the manager and director of a men's barbershop chorus and the lead in his own quartet. Literally sitting at their feet, shaded by the kitchen table with its special-occasion leaves added for extension, I honed my ear and learned how to name concert pitches without having to use a pitch pipe. I had inherited relative, near-perfect pitch from this maternal grandfather I never knew, and I learned to use it to my advantage.

I taught myself to purposely sing off-key when anyone thought to force me into performance with the others. Many scoff at the idea of having to "learn" to sing off-key, but for a perfectionist child who slept every night only when the radio had been playing for approximately an hour, it was a skill. I can hear a pitch and replicate it almost flawlessly in any song; but if I choose, I can also butcher it beyond recognition, leaving it shredded by the wayside like the spilled guts of unrecognizable road kill.

When I was about four or five years old, my mother and father entered me into the church play with my brother, Josh, who got one of the lead parts. Miss Donna, our

play director, was a lovely individual with the orange, permed teacher's mullet of the 80s and lots of large, perfectly even, white teeth. She smelled like powder-fresh drugstore perfume and wore floral blouses and dresses that always had a blue background. I loved her, and meaning no disrespect toward my mother, whom I also adored, I had visions of what it would be like to be Miss Donna's daughter, so I could wear powder-fresh drugstore perfume and wear blouses with daisies and carnations splattered across them. Miss Donna gave each of us a bootlegged copy of the music for the play, and I listened to my tape so often it needed to be spliced. At home in my room or while playing He-man and She-ra in my brother's room, I would have the tape playing and would sing every line of every song at the top of my lungs. Josh would tell me to sing quieter. I tended to ignore him, mostly to get on his nerves and get back at him for flushing my Barbie dolls' heads and other randomly truncated limbs down the toilet so that I had to play with his stupid action figures instead. As I would sing, my parents would listen, and they and Josh would all report back to Miss Donna to let her know that even though I refused to sing above a whisper during practice—or move my mouth at all—I knew the whole play by heart. Their intelligence work paid off, and Miss Donna announced one day as I was minding my own business in the corner of the room that I was going to have a small solo part in a song with two other little girls.

She probably assigned the role to me because of some sort of pressure she felt to include each child in the play and make them feel important by giving everyone a small part, even if it was only a line or two. I have never understood this compulsion in adults to force clearly introverted children into public participation. Some of the most brilliant minds in the world were introverts—Einstein, Newton, Darwin. Once left to themselves

to think and tinker, there's no end to their ideas and creativity, yet, adults feel compelled to meddle, to "help the quiet ones develop social skills." Baloney.

I was terrified, and immediately took offensive action by letting Miss Donna know—clearly and as loud as I was able—that it was simply. not. happening.

"Oh, now," she said, her voice heavily sweet like sorghum syrup dripping from a juicer, "you'll be wonderful. Don't you worry. It'll be just fine."

I resolved not to sing that solo part even if it killed me and my whole family including my brother (no big loss there, he was mean to me most of the time anyway) and my beloved German Shepherd/Wolf mix, Kahn.

We practiced for weeks, and each time I got up and slogged through the solo I had known by heart since the day I got my bootlegged tape. Donna would smile her straight, white smile with her huge teeth, nodding her head at us for encouragement, and she'd hug us after practice and leave her powder-fresh smell burning in our nostrils as she told us how wonderful we were.

The big day came, my debut Daddy called it; my brother was the lead but I? I was going to steal the show, totally shock the audience with my vocal stylings, Daddy said. He looked down at me with his poufy near-black hair and cobalt eyes and said he was proud of his honey-haired girl. The play started, and Josh sang a song about an invisible dog named Germs and another song about fishing an old boot out of a pond. Dialogue was performed, stilted laughter grudgingly given by an audience of captive parents, grandparents, and church deacons.

Then our little trio.

I was responsible for the third verse of the song, Miss Donna's way of making up for the first verse being shouted off-rhythm by the tone-deaf redheaded girl and the second verse being whispered by the unfortunate soul with the brown, bowl haircut and hand-me-down lavender dress with frayed lace on the collar. I wore the only dress my mother could get me to wear—a teal green T-shirt dress my grandmother had sown with a teal, pink, and purple plaid skirt and cutouts in the front that showed the same plaid underneath.

We all three sang together on the chorus after each verse, Miss Donna mouthing the words with us as she sat facing us on the front pew with her flashlight and master copy of the play score in her lap, her giant teeth chomping off each syllable like so many carrots. When it was time for the third verse, she looked at me with her powder-fresh smile and orange hair with a kind of expectant triumph, knowing I could save the song.

I didn't open my mouth. Just stared back at her with a blank look on my face, determined not to crack.

After I missed the first few syllables, she started nodding her head like a mother cat nudging her kitten, mouthing the words, each more pronounced than the last so she could be sure I could read her lips. After the first full line of silence, she started whispering them to me—the shouting kind of whisper that's always louder than anyone's normal speaking voice. By the end of the first full musical phrase, the little brunette girl with the unfortunate haircut and frayed collar started to cry, and the little redheaded girl reach around her to pinch me, as if I were sleeping and she had only to wake me up so I could start singing.

Miss Donna forgot to keep smiling, looked panicked, started searching with her eyes through the shadowed background on the stage where all the other children were waiting for their turn to sing after we were finished. Her orange hair frizzed and bounced with each glance. I sensed movement to my left, felt footsteps behind me, and looked over to see my brother as he stepped up and took my hand, singing the rest of the verse for me so the song and show could go on without being a complete disaster. He smiled at me with pity and misplaced understanding in his eyes, thinking I was simply too afraid, too little to handle the pressures of showbiz. Too green.

I was furious, felt my face get hot and tingly, and I squeezed his hand back as hard as I could hoping to break a finger or two. As he extricated his hand from mine and instead wrapped his arm around my shoulders, my dad looked a little embarrassed and concerned, probably wondering where this strange, silent child came from, so unlike all the other children in our extended family, so unlike the bubbly giggle-box with a voice too big for her body he saw every day at home. This was not the child that won screaming contests in the back yard against her brother and their friends.

My mother knew exactly what had happened, and a few days later, when we got pictures back that my uncle had taken of the play and watched the home video he made, she took the time to make it clear to me that she knew. When everyone was in the kitchen stealing her freshly baked chocolate chip cookies, she paused the frame on the video and took a moment to stare at me as I looked at pictures. She pointed her finger at me on screen, then on the picture I was holding in my hand. I was in the background on the video, clearly ignoring what was going on around me and not paying any attention. I had my head down and was playing with my hands, my mouth open when everyone

else's was closed, which made it obvious I was making up some sort of song or game, which I wasn't supposed to be doing. In the picture of the three of us girls singing our song, she pointed to my face—my round, angry, sullen face where my mouth was stubbornly closed while the other two girls were obviously singing.

We never spoke of it, but from that day on, no matter how much the deacons, leaders, and old ladies pushed and cajoled, my mother never made me sign up for another play. She actively supported my choice to remain out of the spotlight, actually indulging me with permission to lay under the pews with a favorite book and some candy.

She understood I hated being watched, and everyone was much happier when I was sequestered in some lonely corner, perfectly fine amusing myself with whatever my imagination could create.

Perfectly content to have no one watching me.

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HYPERGRAPHIA: (*n*) an overwhelming urge to write

LABILITY: (*adj*) constantly undergoing change
or something likely to undergo change

I make lists. I don't remember when it started, or why.

When I was first learning to read, I made lists of letters, then words I knew how to write. I later graduated to lists of books I had read or wanted to read, which then led to the making of a wish list in general (still mostly books I wanted). Christmas lists started in June or July, kept in the top drawer of my desk, revised and completely rewritten each time a new item was added, because I couldn't live unless it was organized in order of importance from most to least. It became a top priority, made obvious by the fact that while I would sit at my unfinished desk—the same one my mom had when she was my

age—and rewrite my list countless times, the rest of my bedroom was a shambles. I told everyone it was because my carpet was brown and ugly, so I covered it with all of my things. The truth was I was too busy making sure my handwriting and spelling was perfect. If it wasn't, I had to begin again. I couldn't stop until it was perfect.

I had lists of chores on a poster board in the kitchen, both daily and weekly, that were itemized and checked off as I completed them. My brother could just be told, but I wanted it in writing. Like other girls growing up, I kept lists of names I liked that I could use to distinguish my future children—names of foreign, ancient cities I thought sounded exotic, like Alexandria and Cypress, along with more usual names I thought were pretty, like Olivia and Victoria (who would be nicknamed Tory for short, and *not* Vicky, which sounded too plebeian and Queens borough for my refined, ten-year-old taste). Of course, those were just the names of the girls. The boys had their own list, sometimes with both first and middle names, just to make sure it sounded alright. Aidan James and Ian Patrick at the top. For some reason I always chose Irish names for boys.

The lists continued as I aged, information I needed to study for school, written, of course, in the order in which I felt I should study them, then later evolving into the trivialities of everyday life.

Grocery lists, for instance. Of course my grocery lists aren't some willy-nilly jotted bits of shorthand. That would never do. I must first write down everything I know I need from the store. Once this list is complete, I must then go back and revise to make sure each item gets grouped with items in similar sections. Milk, for instance, always goes with coffee creamer, sour cream, and any other milk or cream product, and only after all dairy products are listed can things like orange juice or eggs be listed, because

while they are refrigerated, they're not exactly in the same section of the grocery store. They're a couple of refrigerators down the aisle.

I tell myself this is vital information.

Once the list has been revised and regrouped, it must then be rewritten a third and final time in the order in which the sections or aisles appear in the store, which means I must know at which store I will be shopping. Kroger is not at all the same as Wal-Mart, which is not at all the same as any other store. It is all about planning and awareness.

My mother once noticed me revising and rewriting a grocery list, and when she asked why and I explained that it was much more efficient to list all the items in this way, she laughed and suggested I go get tested for mild OCD or maybe forms of high-functioning autism. I'm not sure she was joking.

I don't particularly like other people seeing my lists. I don't know why, I've just always felt that way. I feel about them the way I have always felt about my journals and diaries. I hoard them, keep them close, tucked into the pockets of my jeans or wadded up with receipts in my purse. I even use diary pages, sometimes, to make lists—pros and cons of big decisions I will never decide to make, people I'd like to pistol-whip if I could get away with it, that sort of thing. When I know someone has seen a list I've made, I feel like I'm standing naked, blushing before them, prepared for final judgment. It's an irreversible invasion of my privacy, a removal of the cloak covering all the secret, ugly things or the tender, raw parts not tough enough yet to withstand direct contact.

Oddly, even when I make lists in order of importance, I never use numbers. Numbering a list makes it so final, so much harder to change the order of importance should the need arise, so much more frustrating.

Numbering would add another step to the revision process.

I can't handle that.

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"In comparison, they said, I was lucky."
--Alice Sebold, *Lucky*

It was supposed to have been me. I was number five. I'd even gotten a card from him the next morning—the morning before I locked myself in the bathroom of my dorm floor in a stall by the windows.

The handwriting was small and cramped—belabored but precise. The lines were remarkably straight for the most part, but dropped off at the ends, going flaccid. There were only two of them:

> Dear No. 5, I'm sorry I missed you last night. I look forward to seeing you again soon and getting to know you even better. Your Admirer

I didn't know about her then. I didn't even think about it, didn't register that he'd addressed me by number since my name had been written on the envelope. I called the investigator assigned to me, and they told me about her when they saw the number, told me about the number five written on her chest.

I could picture it, his list. The dingy, crumpled paper, soiled and discolored from all the times he'd pulled it from his pocket to look at it, to mark through the names as he completed his task.

Or I'd picture it still in the notebook, pristine and unwrinkled, marked for reference by one of those ribbons they attach to the tops of Bibles and expensive sketch

journals, the fountain pen he'd used to write it sitting neatly in a compartment next to it on the desk.

Or I'd picture him, lying on a moldy mattress, sweat-stains permeating his plain shirt, facing the wall where he had us written in numerical order with a grease crayon, like a convict in a bad movie marking calendar days left till it's over or days just begun on death row.

But it didn't matter how I pictured it. It was enough to know he had a list, enough to make me wonder endlessly how long it was, how extensive, how he had come up with the order in which he had placed us, why it was so important. Part of me understood the need for order, the need to have a plan before execution, the need to be organized to be absolutely sure.

Maybe it was that part of me that also understood the sense of urgency—that created the sense of urgency—that had me bunkered in a bathroom the night after number six had jumped line.

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"We are all prisoners but some of us are in cells with windows
and some without."
--Khalil Gibran

The bathroom stall is painted spearmint green, not the pastel of Easter eggs and baby blankets, but not yellow enough to be lime or bile. Scratches in the paint reveal the seminal pink, shadows of claw marks left by those before me, fresh scars after the scabs have been picked away. Jagged, peeling edges surrounding smooth, new skin underneath.

No words. The scratches don't make any words.

Some of them run the length of the stall, from the tiled wall behind me to the hinges of the door. They are long and thin, in rows of twos and threes, staggered the way bobcat markings on a tree appear when they've been sharpening their claws. Others are short and precise. Scalpel incisions or ritual tribal markings.

Tick marks. Measures of time.

I wonder how they'll look if no one ever paints over them, how they'll grow or fade if left to their own devices, their own directions. Will the cold air from the adjacent window cause the paint molecules to shrink, cracking the green even more, like a snake busting out of its old skin during shedding season? If the windows were kept closed, would the paint bubble, the stall panels warp and buckle in the humidity caused by the showers running almost constantly?

I measure my thoughts by the marks in the stall.

Tick marks. Measures of time.

I've got all night.

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"Visibility is a trap."
--Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*

I remember going fishing in the creek with my grandfather, brother, and younger cousin when I was little, probably five or six years old. Pa's been a smalltime Nazarene preacher almost all his life, so he's never had much money. He's also of Cherokee descent, and has always supplemented a small grocery allowance with the everyday hunting and fishing skills of our heritage, passing them on to newer generations. As a result of being poor and claiming blood tradition as our excuse, we seldom bought bait. Instead, we caught worms and chased minnows into a net.

The easiest way for us to catch worms was to wait until after it rained then go out to the edge of the woods or close to the creek bank and lift up large rocks or logs. There were always worms wriggling on the shifted soil where we could grab them with our fingers and plop them into an old Styrofoam coffee cup filled halfway with dirt. It looked like moistened, crushed Oreos. We could wiggle sticks back and forth into the ground and wait for the vibrations to make the worms mad and bring them up to the surface from which we would pluck them like so many wildflowers. This was always great fun since it was a competition to see who could harvest the most worms in the shortest amount of time, filling their cup, but it was nothing compared to the fun of splashing for minnows in the creek on a sultry summer day.

We wore matching T-shirts and shorts my grandmother had sewn from discount fabric she'd found at Wal-Mart, a nouveaux Navajo pattern in vivid oranges and blues, the T-shirts white with patterned sleeves. The boys' shorts were a little longer than mine, the only concession to fashion she would make and really only to make sure people knew I was a girl. Otherwise they'd see three towheaded children with longish hair and dirty faces, scraped knees and monkey calluses, which is what we called the hardened patches of skin on our hands we'd earned climbing trees, fences, and—when necessary for our survival—kitchen cabinets.

The days we'd go bait hunting always seemed the same. It was hot, the sticky kind of heat that spiked our hair at the ends and ran down our throats like melting jelly, swirling in our lungs and stretching them wide with the oppressive, saccharine scent of clover and milkweed. The dry, clay dust would float into our nostrils, rasping like sandpaper over our vocal cords so even as children we sounded like we'd been smoking

cigars and drinking moonshine since before bobcats roamed these woods. Black clouds of gnats occasionally eclipsed the sun and wove themselves as a crown around our heads when we tried to sit in the shade.

Pa would tie netting from one side of the creek to the other on rusted train track spikes we'd found by the old torn-out bridge, then he'd secure the bottom edge of it underneath heavy rocks at the bottom of the shallow part so minnows wouldn't get loose. He'd tell us to start walking up the banks until we got a hundred yards away and to take off our shoes and socks and roll our shorts up good so they didn't get too wet and Grandma didn't holler at us later. He always picked a deep enough area where it would come up to our knees and our feet would meet soft mud rather than sharp pebbles, but shallow enough where the minnows would be near the edges of the banks and under the overgrown brush. We always checked for snakes before we ran.

Once he secured the net, he'd wade out of the creek and roll his pants down, drying his legs as he went with the worn linen and cotton blend of his workingman's trousers. Then he'd stand up, ask if we were ready, knowing we hadn't gotten far enough away to suit ourselves yet. He'd yell to not go too far, that where we were was probably just fine, far enough. He'd say we didn't want to catch too many and break the net, even though he knew we really did.

The water, even in the early August afternoon, was cold. We stepped in it up to our ankles first, letting it slither around us and bracelet our feet with icy tingles before acclimating enough to wade further. Sometimes I started off on the sides, but I liked the middle, mostly because I wanted to play in the water more than I wanted to chase minnows, and it was deeper in the middle than close to the banks. I'd look down and

wiggle my toes in the mud and watch the clear water cloud up with green and red tangles of algae and clay, watch the skimmer bugs skate away as we splashed and squirmed. Our shorts were soaked before we ever got to our places. Grandma would yell, but we didn't care.

Pa was standing by his net, shaded by overhanging trees drooping with defeat from lifetimes of summer drought. Once he saw we were ready, he'd call out instructions and warnings about how he needed us to make sure we all went at the same pace so the minnows would all go in the same direction and wouldn't scatter behind us. We should do it like we were herding cows instead of tiny fish. We okayed and ignored him, and when he told us to get ready, we yelled like savages out for blood and went galloping downstream gracelessly, water droplets exploding around us like fireworks in moonlight as the minnows darted in silver sun-bursts trying to escape the bronzed legs that must surely have stirred them up like a hurricane. My brother was the oldest, and charged with the task of quickly untying the net and lifting it from the water on his side while Pa did the same from the bank where he had waited. My cousin, Jordan, and I were supposed to catch any stray minnows and toss them back into the net, which resulted in a water fight as we tried unsuccessfully to cup our hands and scoop escaped bait up and over the netted barrier but instead splashed each other in the face, the taste of limestone-filtered water and stirred soil lingering in our laughter.

Oh, yes. Grandma would fuss something fierce.

Along with half a school of minnows we caught crawdads and tadpoles, carefully sorting through them so we didn't put them in our bait buckets. There weren't enough

crawdads to make for dinner and tadpoles make poor bait and are better left to turn into frogs that are fun to chase down the tree line.

Once we'd caught our prey, we packed up our gear and walked toward a shaded bend in the creek where the water gathered and churned in depths of three to seven feet before moving back into the shallows, the kind of spot we always saw in movies and pictures where the creek widened to a large pond and had gnarled trees sloping out and over it with ropes tied to them that were good for swinging and launching oneself into a flailing fall over the swimming hole. The kind of spot Pa liked to hold old-fashioned baptisms in. But we weren't allowed to swim or play at soul-cleansing until after fishing was finished. Our motto was always, "Food first."

While Pa checked the rods and reels and tied sinkers and floaters on the lines for us, I bent over the bait bucket and watched the minnows. Some swam around in circles frantically, doing anything to try to find a way to go back to where they were, to the way life was before they got caught. There were always a few, though, who just seemed to hover, floating somewhere between the water's surface and the bucket floor, resigned and unenergetic but alert and watchful. Those are the ones whose eyes looked back at me. Those are the ones I was more likely to secretly scoop up out of the bucket at the last minute and set free in the deeper pool, saving them from the stabbing fate of a forced food chain but reassigning them to a lonely life without the rest of their school, which is no kind of life for a minnow at all, though I wouldn't think of that till a few years later. I couldn't watch those minnows and know that I had a hand in their demise. I couldn't bear to think of them looking back at me and them knowing that this giant watching them was their predator. I didn't want to be a predator.

I did a little better with the worms, mostly because Pa told me they didn't have eyes and they didn't feel it when we put the hook through them, threading them onto the line then casting them out and slamming them into the water. This didn't bother me as much if I thought about them not being able to feel the pain of the hook's slice and know they were getting ready to be forcibly drowned and/or ripped asunder by fish teeth. I always felt like the minnows knew because they would look back at me with their mini-marble eyes, but the worms didn't have eyes, so they didn't know any better and weren't sad about it.

Ignorance is bliss, after all.

I always caught the most fish, too, using just worms. Eventually, all the men in my family stopped taking me fishing, claiming it was no fun if all they did was watch me catch a fish then watch me throw it back while their lines never got a bite.

I told them the fish always bit my line because they knew they could eat for free and still get thrown back, so they weren't scared. This, of course, was a lie, because when I was the only one catching fish, I was the one feeding us, but it made Pa laugh out loud, which made me break into uncontrollable giggles, until we were both laughing so hard our eyes would water and our fishing poles would shake, scaring the fish away. He was a man who never needed a reason to laugh, but would take one any time he could get it.

They didn't all get thrown back. I got to where I hoped for the small ones—the baby bluegill and sunfish—because they were never big enough to keep. I loved watching the sun and water turn their skin to rainbows, and I loved the ripple in the water

as I'd set them free by the bank and they'd swim away in a frenzy to a place underwater where we couldn't see them anymore. Where they were safe from preying eyes.

Afterward, we'd lie around for a little while before packing up to go home. Pa would lean back against a tree trunk and wind up fishing line, looking around at the yellowed tree tops. He'd smile a little, take his golden wire-rimmed glasses off his nose to wipe them clean with his dirty shirt, and remind us that no matter how bad things get, no matter who hurts us or how bad, God put all these trees, all these little creeks we visited, in our way so we'd always have someplace to go where everything we needed was right there. If we ever needed to get closer to Him and hide in His arms, all we needed to do was climb the nearest tree and sit a spell. Other than the birds, the trees were the closest thing to heaven.

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"He is the individual who looms
over everything
with a single gaze which no detail,
however minute
can escape."
--Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*

I'm being watched.

There are hidden cameras in my bedroom, my bathroom, my living room, that I can't see and will probably never be able to find. They record everything I do, everything I say. I imagine it to be like reality TV shows when they cut to the night-vision cameras that show cast members in shades of green, complete with glowing green eyes. We are all zombies.

I've been told about it so I can remain aware and alert, so I'm cautious and can prepare to defend myself should the need arise. I'm offered counseling and self-defense

classes to help me cope with the fact that no one plans to remove the cameras they know are there because they want to catch this guy, and for some reason, out of the hundreds of "channels" he has access to, he watches mine and a few others more often than most, but he always switches frequencies before they can track it. I turn the counseling and the classes down. It's bad enough I have to know about it. I don't want to talk about it with someone else. Plus, I work almost full-time. I don't have time for another class.

For the investigators assigned to track surveillance activity, it's like chasing a phantom. And I don't know what's worse: knowing I'm being watched, or knowing others are, too.

Of course it's worse when it's you. Anyone who says otherwise is lying.

But I want to survive, so I shuffle forward, at least on the outside, as if nothing is wrong.

I eat. I sleep. I go to class. I go to work. I come back to the dorms at 2:30 in the morning, illegally parking in one of the front zones that are supposed to be fifteen minutes only. I collect parking violations like they're lottery tickets. I shower so I don't smell like chicken grease and yeast rolls when I go to bed.

But none of it is like it used to be.

A shower is no longer a chance to stand with my back under the hard water and let it pound out the soreness in muscles overworked under the weight of precariously balanced restaurant trays and book bags packed to maximum capacity, no longer a place to let the steam burn away the day, the community dirt of 8:00 AM classrooms, the residue of odorous residence halls, the sweat and grease of the dinner rush and adrenaline. A shower is just another staged appearance.

Just another hook.

I notice everything, now.

The stalls in Clay Hall are two-celled blocks. The first cell has a bench built in for shower caddies and personal paraphernalia, and is separated from the rest of the bathroom by an opaque, pale green, plastic curtain for privacy so residents can shed their outer layers before stepping under the spray, but two of the curtains don't even stretch across their entryways. They leave a two-inch gap on each side, enough to take a quick peek walking by. The second cell is the actual shower stall, with faded, bottle-green tiles so old that what looks like mildew and mold is just faded paint from the bleaching they take every day. The farthest shower—the one up against the back wall—shoots water out so hard and so fast that most of the girls try to stay away from it unless it's the only one available and they have to have a shower at that moment. It feels like a thousand shots from a pellet gun being fired from above, and when it hits the tile it sounds like the shattered beads from a broken necklace scattering on the floor. I love it. After a double shift waiting tables, it's better than a Swedish massage. It's the best way to relax before I get my five hours of sleep I like to have for my early class. It's also the best way to wake up in the morning—a couple seconds under a cold spray is better than two giant cups of coffee from the Java house near the commons.

It smells like chlorine and shampoo residue, a potpourri of bleach and soapy fruit salad. I use old soccer sandals as shower shoes, knowing they'll dry out just in time to wear to class in the morning. They're worn underneath from rubbing against the terrain of tile and grout grains, and soap suds pool in the bottoms of them around my feet so I have to stand on one leg every now and then to empty them. Seeing the showers cleaned

each day might normally inspire me to brave them barefooted since I hate wearing shoes, but I've seen the hair and debris other girls have left in these stalls, and it's not worth the risk. Girls are gross. I found a used condom and an insulin needle once, and afterward never once considered going without shower shoes, because at two or three in the morning, I could never predict what I might find. A lot can go on in a coed dorm.

Sometimes Julie, the girl living across the hall, will finish studying about the same time I get off work and we both walk down to the showers together, talking the entire time we're bathing so it doesn't seem so lonely or so much like a horror flick. She tried singing once, but I threatened to squirt shampoo down her throat if she ever did it again. I told her I was convinced she could make toads and cicadas weep.

On nights when it's just me, though, things are different. Quiet.

Each trickle tracking down behind the last, each drop sliding across skin leaves in its wake goose bumps not from a chill but from knowing he might be watching. Petrifying. Personal.

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"Threat was everywhere. No place or person was safe.
My life was different from other people's, it was natural
that I behaved differently."
--Alice Sebold, *Lucky*

I was bait.

I wanted to go into hiding, to drop out of school and move back home with my mommy and work in a small law office as a secretary for the rest of my life, maybe get a couple large dogs or a half dozen cats to keep me company. I wanted to go back to the way things were, to when I was comfortable in my own skin and didn't constantly feel an

impending sense of doom, to feel like the next corner I was going to turn around would not be my last.

But I was asked not to do that. I was told they could catch this guy if I could act natural and act like I didn't know I was being watched, like I wasn't aware my every move and word may or may not be recorded and later used against me. Someone even made a joke about it: I was an English major wasn't I? Well, didn't Shakespeare say that all the world's a stage? Just act natural.

There is nothing natural about this world. This is not the world I used to inhabit.

When he went through his Police Administration classes, Josh would quote things to me from his textbooks, practicing his oaths, the laws, law enforcement code, and the Miranda. I told investigators the cameras, having to "act natural" when nature had nothing to do with it, made me feel like a criminal, as if I had the right to remain silent, that anything I did or said could and probably would be used against me.

I wanted to maintain my right to remain unseen.

I was also reminded that there were others like me. Some of them knew they were being watched and agreed to help catch the voyeur by doing anything they could, which meant we all agreed not to contact each other in any way so he wouldn't catch on and figure out we knew. We all desperately wanted to make it stop, and were willing to do almost anything necessary to make that happen. We agreed to isolate ourselves even more than we already were from the world as we knew it. We agreed to imprison ourselves in a world where we were constantly surveilled, a world where we were being oppressed by an unseen adversary to whom we had all given power so we could make certain that power over us would be only temporary and that he would be punished.

We agreed to a kind of self-imposed panopticism. We lived in spaces—our dorm rooms and apartments—that were small theaters, each home to a private, one-woman show almost 24 hours a day. Our manipulator controlled us not through brute force—that would come later—but instead by manipulating our thoughts, but even more frustrating was that he didn't know he could do that. We had each agreed to give him power he didn't know he had, martyring ourselves on the altar of surveillance technology rather than risking the wrath of someone who could be psychotic. It wasn't worth that risk, and we didn't know enough about his methods to counteract them, didn't understand the mentality behind the motive, didn't even know what the motive was.

I subjected myself to full disclosure, to constant visibility, not only to the predator but to *his* predators (Law Enforcement) who monitored the situation. In essence, I assumed responsibility for the power he exercised over me. I helped author and carry out my own role within the situation. I willingly walked into captivity to save myself, losing myself by necessity in the process.

This is normal. Natural.

I've read somewhere or heard it said, I don't know which, that wild animals kept in captivity for a prolonged period of time may suffer from a weakening of instinctual behaviors, losing the means necessary for survival in their natural habitat. They learn to rely so heavily upon their captors that, once released, they cannot function in the same natural capacity they once did, and are certain to die soon after returning to the wild or at least retain odd habits and traits they developed while in captivity. Even an abused dog, after being rehabilitated for years, will snap in rage or cower in fright at the sight of a raised hand.

My entire world was my cage. From what I understood, there were cameras everywhere: in our bedrooms, in the showers, in apartments. Once informed, once committed, I was trapped. My body and who saw it was no longer under my control, apparently hadn't been for months, since I moved into Clay Hall. Imagine, the only thing physically unique to me and independent from any person other than those of my own choice was no longer mine to display or disguise. At a time when all I wanted to do was hide, invisibility was impossible.

At the time in my life when I had left home in order to finally gain my freedom, I had instead left my freedom at home in order to plunge headlong into a kind of prison.

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"Life without liberty is like a body without spirit."
--Khalil Gibran

Numb.

I'm convinced it's not complete freedom from pain, but instead the reaction of my nervous system when I feel so much pain both physically and psychologically that I shut down. I still feel it. I've just lost the ability to care.

This is survival mode.

This is the step before an actual coma where the mind retreats into the subconscious and creative subconscious and the body functions on autopilot because existence is impossible at a conscious level. I am aware, but I am removed from awareness.

My psychologist friend tells me I suffer from acute stress disorder, similar to post-traumatic stress disorder; I become detached, depersonalized. Desensitized.

I am a robot.

I cannot relate to humanity. I do not want to relate to it. It is unappealing.

I have always heard that whatever doesn't kill us makes us stronger, and I have never been brave or unkind enough in my response in the past to say what I really think, which is this: that's such a stupid thing to say.

What people are doing when they say that is opting out of actually connecting with the person with whom they are speaking because they're too afraid of confronting someone else's pain when they can't even look their own in the face and admit it exists.

What is true is this: what doesn't kill us still usually manages to wipe out our resistance and leaves in its wake the rubble and some vague remnants of our former, shabby strongholds and the realization that we have nothing left to claim but our utter exhaustion and destroyed dreams. Strength comes from the decision, when sitting at the bottom of the ocean and looking up through miles of blue-black, crushing pressure, to try to swim through the mess of predators, seaweed, and trash to the surface rather than drowning, and from doing it with our eyes closed or open and burning. Strength comes after slogging through the upward struggles toward less hostile atmospheres, and like the muscles and bone mass in a newborn's body, takes years to develop, usually through more aches and pains. Life is fragile and fracturing at the same time.

It would be easier, and probably far more enjoyable, to drown.

The problem is that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who are afraid to die, and those who are afraid to live. I take it back, there are three: those who are afraid of either/both. Even if we go through the valley of shadows and death, we will tell ourselves that we are not afraid, all the while clutching our teddy bears and calling for Mommy, wondering how close the bogeyman really is, knowing he will catch up to us

soon. After we fall apart, we try to put ourselves back together again, to make things look like they used to, at least from the outside, but there are now always going to be cracks in the facade. Like a water-damaged car that's been fixed up and put back out on the lot for resale, shiny and like new, there are always going to be signs of wear and tear where we don't want to see them. There are always scars from the trouble that necessitated the resurrection.

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"There are two kinds of darkness,
the first so full of breath you know you are close to God.
The second is the darkness of distance, of plugged up tunnels and exhaust.
In this you are far from God..."
--Lauren Slater, *Lying*

I am a creature of darkness, yet I crave light.

When I bought my home, I made my final decision based on superficial stipulations. I wanted as much natural light as I could possibly get while still maintaining an energy-friendly heating and cooling unit. I am and have always been most productive after the sun sets, but I bought my house because it has a seven-foot-wide picture window in the living room that faces the sun two-thirds of every day, plus two full-sized windows adjacent to it in the kitchen space. The front half of my home is an open-air plan that remains flooded with light from sunrise until late afternoon. For the first five years of dwelling here, I refused to put up any curtains more substantial than one-layer sheers and white lace. It would be a waste of natural light to buy a home with giant windows only to cover them up. I like to have boundaries illuminated and clearly defined.

On the other hand, I don't like being in my living room or kitchen after dark with only sheers or lace curtains to protect my privacy. Like a two-way mirror, when it's dark

on one side and light on the other, the ones in the dark can see everything that happens in the light. It's why the observation room next to a police interrogation room is usually dark when a suspect is being questioned. Sitting in darkness, light is more easily discernable. The same concept is used in movie theaters when the lights go dim. The extreme darkness amplifies the light on the screen, causing the audience to focus intently on the action rather than on their surroundings.

We all like to maintain our suspension of disbelief.

I work until after midnight, and when I go to bed, I leave the bedroom door open so the morning light from the living room will stretch down the hall to wake me. Since college, I have operated on the same pattern of sleep-deprivation for the sake of light and productivity. Get up with the dogs and the sun, go to work, come home, perform whatever tasks are necessary to prepare myself for the next day, then either read, write, draw, clean, or anything else that can or should be done. I don't sleep deeply anyway, at least not for extended periods of time, so I see no need to waste time pretending.

Light is for consciousness, for practicing purpose, for efficiency, for responsibilities, for clearly defining limitations.

Darkness is for creating interpretation, for expansion into unknown territory.

I do not exist without both.

I often fall asleep reading by the light of my bedside lamp, wrapped in the security of being able to see and define the familiarity of my surroundings; but, I find I cannot *really* sleep until the lamp is extinguished and the room is completely dark, the absence of light limitless. I operate in limbo between the two.

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"He waits to attack the moment
you let your guard down. The answer--
never let it down, not even for a second."
--Alice Sebold, *Lucky*

It is 2:00 AM on a weeknight in November, 2002. I have been lying in my bed on the sorority dorm floor in Walters Hall since 11:00 when my roommate, Kim, called me to tell me not to wait up for her. She is staying with her boyfriend tonight. I don't have a boyfriend. I am too consumed with myself to justify burdening someone else with my paranoia and idiosyncrasies. Even when my selfishness might be excused by the world as something understandable—it is perfectly reasonable to want someone safe and trustworthy to cling to during crisis—I cannot allow myself the luxury. It would be too much trouble to have to explain why I must, before anything else, enter a room and immediately check behind the curtains, the doors, in the closets, under the beds. It is already too much trouble for me to do it, knowing I won't be comfortable anywhere until I do. I want to go back to this past summer at Mom's, when I didn't have to check behind and under things.

In the dark, the light on the fire alarm glows red above the top left corner of the door. The lights of the alarm clock numbers reflect off the yellowed paint on the block walls, limning the paint with splotches of grotesque shadows. I think it looks like smears of sulphur left on the walls of gas chambers. I can see the hallway light, never turned off, glow from behind the door, outlining the gray in strands of white, a geometric cloud and its silver lining. It's so cold outside, the doors that usually swell to fit their frames have shrunk back, retreated into themselves.

My cell phone rings. A private number, which means it's been blocked.

It's the fifth time in twenty minutes he's called.

I pick up and hang up without answering. I turn it off, so he can't track it. My room phone rings, the word PRIVATE bursting into the room in flashes of green. I do not answer it, and scramble to turn the answering machine off before it answers in my stead. He can't track the land line because it doesn't have an analog mode, but I still don't want to hear the silent message he always leaves.

My knife is under my pillow. It's not one of the throwing daggers I grew up practicing with in the back yard, but it's sharp, and the blade is long, and I've practiced with it enough to know I can still inflict damage whether from close range or far. It's a Buck knife, one of the 3 ½ inch hunting blades, which would be fitting if I had to use it on a predator.

I am restless. He never calls this often in one night, never with so little time between calls.

He is hunting me. Trying to unnerve me so it's easier for him to close in for the taking. It only makes sense. When he called yesterday, I answered, and when I didn't hear anyone, I told him I'd gotten his card, sick bastard. Told him if he wanted me to come and get me, then hung up and threw the phone down.

I am no one's for the taking.

I know to expect he'll at least try.

I cannot make myself sit in this room any longer, cannot sleep knowing he can tune into this most private, most vulnerable moment when I am supposed to be secure enough to sacrifice my awareness to the darkness and succumb to dream worlds. I don't want to see him or be seen in either sphere.

I cannot leave, can't go outside, run to my car, drive around aimlessly until the sun comes up like I have done so many nights after work, knowing if I went back to the school I would have to park almost a mile away in the far lot, walk through dim, abandoned lots, hypervigilant, nothing to protect myself from onslought other than adrenalized paranoia and car keys. Even pepper spray is partailly ineffective because when sprayed into an attacker's face, some of it is projected backwards due to the force of the carrying device, also spraying the potential victim. I need to be able to see if I'm going to run away. So I drive instead. Walters Hall, the sorority dorm I moved to for sophomore year, doesn't have the temporary parking spaces I used at Clay, but instead has only a fire zone. They tow for that. I've tried already.

I can't drive tonight, so I stay. I plan. I wait.

I can't sit in this room any longer, though. This cage is too small.

I hear one of the girls cough in the hallway, hear the bathroom door open. I leave my phone in the room, grab my knife, open and locked in the defensive position. I check under the door for shadows to make sure no one could be standing nearby. I am lucky that there are strong lights positioned in the hallway ceiling on either side of my door, both of which act also as the emergency lights when the building loses electricity, creating a constant and reliable warning system, telling me when someone is approaching or standing at my door. I see no shadow, so I open the door enough to peek around the frame.

The hall is empty.

I sprint to the bathroom, knife in hand, allowing my room door to close and lock behind me. I shove the heavy, creaky bathroom door open, watch and listen as I enter.

The girl is in the second stall, opening the door. I tuck my knife into the waistband of my shorts and hide the hilt with my shirt, walk casually toward the stalls. She comes out and says hey, smiles, leaves. The door groans when she opens it. Once it closes, I cut across the short dividing hall that connects the shower room with the rest of the bathroom. I get my knife back out, breathe deeply once, then proceed to check each shower stall.

Nothing behind curtains number one, two, or three. They are all open and easily surveilled. The curtain in number four is partially closed. No shadows behind it, though. I open it just in case. Empty.

What would I have done had it not been? I don't know, try not to think about it. I feel crazy enough already. I don't want to make myself feel helpless.

The fifth is also open, empty. No danger there.

Tub rooms next. They are actual rooms arranged behind the sinks on the other side of the wall, each about half the size of a dorm room, each with its own solid, wooden door. There are only two.

I am lucky. Both doors are standing open, both tubs empty. The doors are leaning against the wall, there is no possible way a human being could squeeze behind them.

I check anyway.

Neither of the entrance doors to the bathroom have opened again since I've been here. I know because they both make noise that can be heard all the way down both ends of the hall. I turn the deadbolt on the shower-room entrance and connect the chain. These doors are the only pieces left of decades before when craftsmanship on campus wasn't a novelty but a necessary commodity. They're steel-reinforced, solid wood, the

locks the original installments used here just as in residential homes. Why they needed chains for the bathroom I will never understand, but I am grateful for it tonight.

I tread softly, carefully back across the dividing hallway to the sink-side, which is what we all call it as opposed to the jokingly offered alternative—the poo-part. I glance back toward the door, make sure it isn't standing open, out of habit. I know it is not. I haven't heard it protest as it does whenever forced to move. I bend down to look under the stalls, all of them visible from the vantage point of the sinks so that I can see all the way down the line. I am checking for feet, for shadow movement. I look over my shoulder briefly, also out of habit. I turn back to stare under the stalls.

I have no idea how long I wait. I know only that my muscles are starting to cramp from holding this position. I have seen nothing.

I walk slowly to the door of the first stall, push it all the way open to make sure it is empty. I do this for every stall. There are six of them. Each empty.

I am satisfied. I walk back to the entrance, deadbolt it and chain it as I did the shower room. I hope no one else needs to use the bathroom tonight. They'll have to go to one of the next floors up or down. I am sorry for the inconvenience. I worry slightly for their safety. It doesn't change my mind.

This is survival.

It's warm in here. Some of the girls always turn the thermostat up so that after they take their showers in the mornings, they don't freeze to death wrapped in only a towel. I understand the sentiment. The tile-and-concrete room is large, cold, drafty. The windows don't open very much, but don't seal tightly, either.

I open one of them now not because of the oppressive heat, which could either be the room or the adrenaline, but because I can't breathe. The remnants of humectant shampoo, strawberry body wash, and tropical-scent air fresheners stuck to each toilet stall mix with the heat and humidity that remains after 70 showers a day for four months. These girls could survive in a rain forest if they're able to breathe normally in this room. I need fresh air.

The window I open is the one closest to the wall, only about a foot tall, situated waist-high, three feet long. There are two of them side by side. The wall above them is made entirely of opaque glass, stretching six feet above to meet the ceiling, translucent so that it both conceals and reveals. This is so that natural light can come through, but so that we can also maintain some semblance of privacy.

The window makes a swift suction noise as I open it, like a vaccuum tunnel briefly opened then closed. Frigid air rushes in to assault my skin. It tingles, but is not unpleasant. It reminds me that I can still feel.

I look out into the dark, see the giant trees that run parallel to the building, reaching up several more stories for heaven. They have no leaves, their trunks and branches standing out in black relief, sillhouetted in the fire of streetlights. They bend, tangle together in the wind, but remain steadfast.

It is cold here. The air from outside smells like winter, the scent of frozen metal. I should move to somewhere else.

Can he still see me here? Does he have cameras angled at this side of the restroom? Why would he want them here?

I am tired. Exhausted. I need to sit.

I move into the sixth stall—the one up against the outside wall of the building—and close the door. Our toilets in this dorm are more like the ones we would find in our homes rather than the industrial ones of Clay Hall. They have backs and lids some of the girls set candles and knick-knacks on like so many grandmothers-in-training. After locking the door, I climb up on the back of the toilet, sit and place my feet on the closed lid of the bowl. I don't want my feet to be visible.

I rethink this, open the stall door again, then methodically close the doors to each of the other stalls. This blocks light, would make detection more difficult. I realize this is unnecessary. I have locked both main doors. No one—not even the cleaning staff and maintenance workers—can get in, short of chopping down the door. The hinges are attached from the inside. I know this.

I close them anyway. I need to be sure, need to take every possible precaution. I go back to the sixth stall, sit silently, my knife in my hand. I focus on breathing deeply but quietly, the sounds of my breath mingling with the sound of the wind brushing by the window, both my exhalations and its reverberations hollow and low. We mourn together, waiting for morning.

Someone has posted something on the back of the door for my reading pleasure, an index of excrement. They've handwritten it on sheets of white copy paper in varying shades of brown and green. This is supposed to be amusing.

This is why we have to keep study files for the people who waste their time doing other things and need help passing tests.

It annoys me and entertains me at the same time, but I'd rather not dwell on excrement. I have been brought low enough as it is.

I think of the card he sent me, the one I found in my box this morning. Hallmark. He was telling me I am something special to him, he is wooing me. Courting. Trying to intimidate.

I am an object to be won by any means necessary, the prize of the conqueror.

I am also only a number, one on a list, not even first, not meant to be last, just another addition to the empire.

Either way, I am not human.

The bathroom stall is painted green, its previous pink showing through the scratches, the chips, a collection of mosaics of then and now.

It's a truly ugly color. I can't imagine it looked any better when it was all pink, but this? This is gross. It reminds me of the milk of magnesia my dad used to try to force down our throats every time our stomachs hurt, all mint and metallic. I will never forget its flavor. My mouth tastes a little of it now, thinking of it, but I know it is the residue of toothpaste and terror.

I reckon it's about the same color as my eyes.

I am bored. I have no way of knowing how much time has passed, how much longer I will be here. I know I'm not leaving until I see daylight. I'll wait forever if I have to. I want to sing to myself, self-soothe, but I don't want to wake anyone up and I don't want to compete with any of the spectral sounds for which I'm straining to listen. I'm tired of staring at scratches and scuffs on the stall door and walls, of following the lines of mildew past each one-inch tile on the wall beside me.

I stare instead at the floor, watching as the shapes of numbers begin to jump out at me, like one of those optical illusions posters my brother used to buy at Wal-Mart. I was

never able to see anything other than a bunch of pretty colors and shapes in them. There were never any dancing dolphins or predatory jungle cats hiding behind the kaleidescopic stills; but I have always seen numbers in the midst of tile floors. I don't remember when it started. There are just some things that the mind is always able to discern, even when they don't make sense. I think in words, in patterns, in color, in shades, in dimension.

I see numbers.

My drawing teacher appreciates my attention to numeric dimension, my insistence upon accuracy, on representing every facet of a perspective, of including the exactly correct number of images, of angles, or objects, within a frame. She is impressed with the extent to which I can focus, block out all other distractions, doggedly maintain my commitment to being meticulous. She is frustrated because it takes me too long to finish a project. I am supposed to create art, to exhibit some freedom within boundaries: an artist is not a court reporter, is not as concerned with facts.

I am concerned with controlling the scene I represent. She is concerned with making sure my projects get turned in on time so she can grade them and still have time for her own projects.

I am stubborn.

I am tired. My back aches from sitting hunched over my knees, my elbows have cut the circultion off in my legs where I've been resting them, where they've dug into the flesh and left triangular red marks that look like burns from the tip of an iron. I sit up straight a moment, still careful to be quiet. I stretch, glancing down again at the floor. I can't help it. The numbers fascinate me.

The number five keeps appearing in different sizes. I tell myself it means nothing, is a natural inclination and fixation developed by fear.

I think of Pa, of what he always told his congregation about fear. It is an acronym: False Evidence Appearing Real. I have used this acronym as a personal affirmation in the past, repeating it to myself over and over when I find myself in unfamiliar situations that make me nervous. This is in direct contrast with the fact that I know the physical responses to fear are entirely real, palpable, instinctual. Guaranteed. The question is whether the cause of fear is real or perceived.

I remember the debate I started in my psychology class over this question. My point was this: whether a threat is perceived or tangible is irrelevant. We operate on a psychological level of awareness, our psyche directing our physiological responses, which means a threat, whether percieved or physically proveable, is still a threat.

Call a spade a spade.

The girl who took up the debate was defensive, angry, said my point was a logical fallacy. I don't recall what her argument was, only know I conceded that she may be correct in the logical sense, but oftentimes logic has nothing to do with our mental states, and it is our mental states that help decide our biological responses. There may be no physical threat in the room, but a person asleep and having a nightmare will exhibit the same physiological responses in fight or flight as a person awake who is feeling fear.

We are animals. We react based on instinct.

This is my nightmare.

I have been living in it for a year, now, constantly looking over my shoulder, constantly laboring to control my breathing, reverting back to the habits I formed when I

was little and most of my days were spent hunting and fishing, climbing trees, playing hide and seek.

I am an excellent hider.

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"...we are what we do."
"...we become what is done to us."
--Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and The Story*

To amuse ourselves, Josh and I used to hide from our babysitter, a neighbor who was only a few years older than Josh and who wanted some money so she could go shopping with her friends. Her parents used to watch us after school when we were littler and she wasn't old enough to babysit. My dad would keep me during the day while Mom was at work, then go to work after Josh got off the bus, taking us next-door first. We kept this up a few years after I started kindergarten, then Tracey and her older sister, Tammy, would take turns watching us at our house.

Tammy was better at punishment than Tracey. She wouldn't spank us, but if we got out of hand, she would intimidate us into a corner and, once there, make us stand on one leg with our arms out to the sides like airplanes, and we weren't allowed to move until she said. This was never a game, because she always knew just how long it would take before our muscles started to cramp, and if we wobbled and fell over or if we put the other leg down at any point, the punishment started all over again. My mother thought my muscles were knotted and aching at bedtime because I was having growing pains. When she found out she was wrong, when Tammy's parents and our parents found out what she was doing—sometimes for an offense as small as spilling our Kool-Aid

accidentally—she was relieved of her babysitting duties and her younger sister, Tracey, took over. She was much more fun and likeable, and in return we didn't give her trouble.

She had perfectly rounded, full bangs bouncing over her forehead and always wore her stick-straight, mousy brown hair half up half down in a tortoise-shell barrette. She loved New Kids On The Block and I liked her in spite of it because she colored with me while Josh would watch cartoons on TV, and she would play hide and seek, always volunteering to go first since she knew we loved to hide more than we liked to seek. We wanted to be smart but not have to do too much physical work. Nothing was off limits as a hiding place except outside and the basement, because outside opened up way too many possibilities and also contained our dog, Kahn, who had once taken a chunk out of Tracey's leg because he thought she was trying to hurt us but was instead tickling us, and because the basement was big and dark and probably had mice in it. Josh always picked normal, habitual hiding places—the hamper, the linen trunk, under a bed, behind the bookcase where we could both squeeze if we held our breath just right and had time to go slow, in the bathtub wrapped up in the inner shower curtain. He would bank on my getting caught first, or he would utilize speed and his ability to move from hiding place to hiding place behind Tracey's back or when she was in another room. He'd have to be careful, though, because he is flat-footed, and has always sounded like a charging buffalo when he walks. It's why he's better at fishing than hunting.

I've never had speed, but I was always small and for some reason never made much noise when I walked or ran. I could be very still when I wanted, could climb anything, which made it easy to hide in plain sight rather than contort my body into awkward positions.

I had three favorite hiding places that I would rotate with some of Josh's regulars so no one caught on quickly. My favorite one was at the top of my mother's closet. I could shimmie up the doorframe and hop over to the shelf that formed a roof over Mom's hanging clothes, then maneuver around small suitcases and her sewing box to sit in the corner, up far higher than anyone expected me to go and in a far darker place than most little girls are willing to stay. From here I could hear and see everything. I also liked standing in Mom's tall boots in the back corner of her closet. It was handy when I needed to find a place quickly because they were against the far wall, again in a dark corner where the light from the bedroom couldn't reach, and they stood directly under her brown and white polka-dotted dress and her long winter coat, the tops overlapped by the hem. I would stand in the boots and burrow up into the coat or the dress so every inch of skin was covered, then stand and wait. I was caught here more often than not, but still not as often as my brother. I only used this place when Josh was it, anyway, because I could count on his impatience to sway the outcome of the game in my favor. He never searched thoroughly, stubbornly refused to believe I could outsmart him because he was my older brother and, well, it just couldn't be done. He also never spent much time looking, getting frustrated with himself, usually, and his lack of ability to seek me out, always calling within five minutes for me to come out, come out, whereever I was. Our rule, though, was that you could never call for the hiders to reveal themselves unless you were standing in the living room, which meant he never knew from where, exactly, I appeared.

My third favorite hiding spot was probably the most clever, and took the least amount of time to arrange, and could cause the most panic. I would hide in Josh's giant

pile of stuffed animals on his bed. He had hundreds. We both did. He kept them on the foot of his bed, and I would dig into the center of the pile, then rearrange them over myself so I was concealed. This took a great deal of concentration on my surroundings and how they affected my body because I had to be able to tell if I was feeling a draft anywhere or not. If I was, I wasn't sufficiently covered. If I didn't feel the flow of air on my skin, I was covered and my hiding place was secure. The last time Tracey ever played hide and seek with us, this is where I hid. I made her cry.

We had started the game, and Josh chose the hamper in the bathroom closet again. I decided I didn't feel like climbing today, and she had found me last time standing in the boots, so I chose the pile of stuffed animals. I burrowed. I rearranged teddy bears and seaworld characters. I curled up on my side into the fetal position to take up minimal space and make sure I didn't change the shape of the pile too much.

She found Josh almost immediately. He should have known the bathroom was always the first place Tracey looked. It held more potential hiding places in it than the three bedrooms combined. The way we played, the first person who got caught could help the seeker try to find the other person. It made the game harder for hiders and more interesting, which kept us entertained longer and made the time go by faster. I heard her find him, felt my heart speed up as they checked my room and came out empty-handed, made their way down the hall to the back of the house where his room and Mom's room faced each other.

They came into his room first, checking under the bed, in the closet. He checked under the covers where his pillow was to make sure I hadn't replaced it. (I wasn't *that* small, for cryin' out loud.) He moved the small teddy bear that was directly in front of

my face, looked right at me, then replaced it. I thought for sure he would see me. I was staring right at him. But he wasn't that good of an actor, and there had been no tell-tale signs he'd noticed me. So they went on to Mom's room, couldn't find me.

I took a chance and wiggled a little so my muscles didn't cramp, but it didn't dislodge any of the animals. They checked the bathroom again, even the kitchen. I wasn't supposed to go in the basement, but they went downstairs to look just in case. I heard Josh say maybe I had gone outside, and heard the panic and frustration in Tracey's voice when she replied that she knew I hadn't, unless I'd climbed out a window, because she hadn't heard either door open when she was counting in the living room. I heard her gasp, heard Josh tell her not to cry, they'd find me.

I heard her hiccup, trying to control her reaction to the fear that she'd lost me, that her parents or mine would kill her for it. I got ready to move, but heard Josh say he'd look again.

We were still playing the game.

He went back through every room, coming to his room last, muttering to himself the whole time. Again he moved the animals, again didn't see me. I was invisible. He crawled all the way under the bed and reached around to every corner until I heard his fingers brush against the wall, then he crawled back out. I watched him run his fingers backwards through his hair.

He yelled my name once, yelled it again louder. Nothing. We were still playing. He hadn't said it. I couldn't come out yet. Tracey came in, yelled my name, too. I could see where she had been crying. I hated to watch, but we were still playing the game. It was the rules.

Finally they said it, in unison, “Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

They weren’t in the living room where they should have been, but I let it slide. I burst forth out of the stuffed animal pile like I was exploding out of a rocket. They both jumped back and screamed.

I crowed, “You couldn’t find me you couldn’t find me,” in the singsong voice all children reserve for taunting each other, laughing until I saw Tracey crying again.

Josh angrily accused me of switching hiding places, which I vehemently denied, not that it mattered since he did it all the time. Tracey hugged me so tight I couldn’t take in air, grateful she wouldn’t have to explain to her parents or mine why I was missing, mumbling something about how I sure knew how to make her earn her money. I got a little worried. Josh was so mad at me for scaring them he wanted me punished. I thought Tracey would be like her sister and try to do it, but she made me like her even more because, instead, she praised me and told me I was the best hider she’d ever seen.

We never played again after that.

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“...if I am made to wait long enough
for something I dread, my nervousness dissipates
into a steely boredom. It is a mind-set and it goes like this:
If hell is inevitable, I enter what I call trauma Zen.”
--Alice Sebold, *Lucky*

I have not moved off the back of this toilet. I have no idea how long I’ve been here, whether a few minutes or a few hours. I have been praying for safety, for comfort, the whole time, begging and bartering. I have recited “99 Bottles of Beer On the Wall” at least three times in my head.

It feels like days.

This must be what solitary confinement on death row feels like—an everpresent, saturating boredom seeping into my bones, overshadowed only by certain knowledge of doom and hopelessness. I have been reduced to the status of prisoner of war, my mind and this bathroom the battlefield. I wonder again if he can see me. I hope he cannot, but after a year of living as if I am always watched, I cannot imagine why he would not be able to see me here just like he can see me any other place, can't imagine he hasn't been this thorough after taking the time and trouble to rig up everything else.

I have counted, or at least tried to count, the dots on the ceiling in each tile. I have never gotten past the first one, always losing my place somewhere in the one hundred nineties. I estimate each tile to have at least 500 black dots in it. Each one is unevenly spaced between its neighbors, and each looks like the leftover graphite from a pencil being thrown up so that it sticks for a moment before falling back down. I know this isn't so because they are too uniformly spread over the tiles, but I can't think of anything else it looks like.

I want to throw my knife up to see if it will stick in the ceiling, but I refrain. If I couldn't catch it on the way back down, it would clatter across the floor, and I don't want to make any noise.

I think again of last night's victim, of the pain, the panic, she must have felt. I hate that I don't know her name, her face, her story. I hate that I don't know the names, faces, or stories of the ones who came before her, what they went through, how he attacked. I want to be able to better understand their plight and I want to know what to expect.

I hate, more than anything in the world, not knowing.

I am angry that none of the investigators or law enforcement officials were smart enough to know what he would do, smart enough after the first four girls were raped to keep a closer eye on us. When the rapes started a month ago, they said they had known, somehow—they won't tell me how—that they had found out, about his list and knew who was on it, that I couldn't know, that I wasn't cleared for that kind of information, that all I needed to know was that he was violent, was watching us, that we all needed to be cautious but that we were being monitored so that, if he came after us, they would be able to intervene.

Why didn't they intervene?

This is how it always happens in the movies and on TV, I thought: all of a sudden the perpetrator becomes violent, all of a sudden eleven people have to die before the twelfth one can be saved. And is it worth it to save the one and still lose the eleven? Is it fair?

I have decided that when it's me, when I'm the one left, it is fair. I want it to be fair.

I cry for the other girls, actively hate our "admirer" not only for the game he is playing with me but for what he did to them. But I do not want to have anything more in common with them. I do not want to be another crime scene, another rape kit of gathered evidence, another counseling patient, another file, another statistic.

I don't want to be a number.

So I will wait here for the night. Eternity.

I wish morning would hurry.

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"...it is always the body that is at issue--
the body and its forces, their utility and their docility,
their distribution and their submission."
--Michel Foucault, *Discipline* & *Punish*

My grandfather, in addition to being a hunter and preacher, is a taxidermist, has always been a taxidermist. He used to collect money for trapping animals that were considered pests. If they weren't injured, he would take them elsewhere and let them go. When I asked him once why he didn't just kill them like the rest, he looked at me sadly, said people are cruel enough to each other. There is no need to be cruel to animals on top of it. He would use a variety of traps, most of them cages with locks that would trigger once an animal distributed its weight at a certain point within the hidden trap.

The traps I hated, refused to help set or clean, were steel mechanisms that looked like the unhinged jaws of a shark. They were used only in the woods, and rarely. He didn't use them unless specifically asked, only in cases where the prey was potentially dangerous and extremely populous—coyotes being one of the main targets. These traps were meant to kill, but they could cause immeasurable pain if they weren't triggered just right. It was heartbreaking to know when Pa was using them. I couldn't bear the thought that a living thing could and would be made to suffer so badly simply because it had adapted to its current circumstances in order to help its species survive. I knew it had to hurt, because he once caught a coyote that chewed its own paw off in order to escape. He knew what he had caught based on the paw it had left behind. To inflict that kind of pain upon itself in order to escape the pain of the trap was unfathomable to me.

What I hated most about those traps was the high probability of error. There was no strategy for making sure they caught only their intended prey, no way to set them to

keep other animals out, and more often than not they ended up snaring an innocent bystander than they did a pest. Foxes were the worst, their habits and huntings grounds similar to the coyotes, but their bodies so much smaller. They were curious and quiet, unassuming omnivores. They were beautiful. They were not, usually, pests.

The ones he caught that he didn't mean to catch who were injured were either tranquilized and cared for so they could be released back into the wild, or they were injured so badly they were shot, once through the head, to end their agony. They had suffered enough already.

I went with him once, to check the traps, when we were on a fishing trip to the lake. It was early morning, and he didn't think he had caught anything, he said, because it was probably too soon and he had only set them up late yesterday, but since we were so close he wanted to check.

I will never forget it.

There is nothing more disturbing to me, I am convinced, than coming into contact with an angry, frightened animal that cannot understand its situation. They snarl, hiss, snap, scratch, do everything they possibly can when backed into a corner to survive. Even the ones who have already lost so much blood they don't have the strength to fight. They will do anything they can to protect their right to die in peace.

A good trapper knows this, is aware of the natural animal responses. He checks his traps often to make sure they are well cleaned and oiled and to make sure an animal does not suffer needlessly. The point is not mutilation; the point is submission.

He had caught another fox, this one small and blue-gray, with a little orange around its neck, the color of a red sunset glowing on a golden corn field. He had solid

black ringing his nose all the way around and reaching up to each eye, his ears tipped in white. He was beautiful.

He'd gotten his front right paw snared, the teeth of the trap baring down at the joint. When he heard us, he started moaning, barking, shuffling. He knew a predator was coming, probably thought we were coyotes. To them, he would be dinner. I couldn't see him yet, but could hear him moving in the dead leaves. We walked slowly, both in moccasins and moving as quietly and as calmly as possible. When we came up the rise and looked down on him from about ten yards away, I froze, whimpered a little, began to cry silently. I knew any noise would only further upset him. I crouched down, curled into myself, and watched as Pa inched closer, praying the fox would stop moving. Each time he tried to shuffle away, the trap dug further into his tendons. I could have sworn I saw bone. His blood oozed into his fur, crusted his white sock with ugly splotches of brown and red. Each time he felt it dig, he yelped, whimpered, then bared his teeth again. His eyes were dilated, darting back and forth until finally settling, unblinking, on Pa.

I heard Pa tut tut a little, murmer about the loss of blood. There was a pool of it gathered under the trap. This fox had laid here for a long time, probably all night, waiting to die. Without turning around, Pa softly told me to walk back down the hill and go to the truck, to open the tailgate and then get into the front seat. He'd be down in a minute.

I looked back one time at the fox. He had stopped backing away, had flattened his ears and collapsed to the ground, staring always at Pa as he inched forward.

I knew what was getting ready to happen, wanted no part of it. The fox knew it, too, wanted the pain to go away.

I got back to the truck, did as I was told, wailed and cried like a baby until I couldn't see. I was so loud I never heard the shot. Just felt the tailgate slam before Pa came around to the driver's side and slid in, handed me his hankerchief and said not to worry, everything was okay now for that fox. He looked sad, asked if I still wanted to go fishing. I shook my head no. I didn't feel like it any more. It was too much like hunting, to much like setting a trap for the fish.

I hated traps.

I hate to see things suffer.

***

"The...impacts of stalking can be extensive, and may include symptoms of traumatic stress, social withdrawal, depression, anxiety, fear, emotional numbing, and stress-related physical problems...In particular, the repetitive nature of stalking can lead to a cycle where intrusive behaviors trigger crisis states in the victims. If adequate supports and coping skills are not available, this pattern can evolve into a chronic state of crisis and hypervigilance."
--Emily Spence-Diehl, "Stalking & Technology: The Double-Edged Sword"

It has been ten years since I started college, nine since my stalker, a violent serial rapist, was caught by law enforcement. He had fixated too often and for too long, allowing them to trace digital and analog signals back to his location, where they picked him up, found him preparing to go attack number seven. There were supposed to only be two more after me. He had recently added to his list so that there would have been three. He had been so careful before, waiting at least a few days between attacks so it was harder to trace him, biding his time and wallowing in his grandiosity and intellectual superiority before going after his next victim, a sociopathic narcissist.

He'd had enough surveillance equipment and technology in his apartment to be a one-man security operation for the Pentagon.

I was told he was being tried not only as a voyeur and serial stalker, as a rapist, but also as an attempted murderer because of the physical damage he had done to some of his victims and because they had all eventually contracted HIV. Knowing that he will never be paroled does not make me feel better.

Too much was lost to justify his punishment.

I am also told that, where he's going, odds are that he'll be killed within three months. If not, he'll wish he were dead after all of the things they'll do to him. It's an odd code of honor for those on the wrong side of the punitive system. Murderers will look at rapists as if they are monsters, and will endeavor to exterminate them, then brag about the wonderful thing they have done.

This does not make me feel better, either.

Too much was lost to justify permanently releasing him from punishment.

I want him to suffer.

***

"...I live in a world where two truths coexist; where both hell
and hope lie in the palm of my hand."
--Alice Sebold, *Lucky*

There is a bird in the tree outside singing. I hear it. I have had my eyes closed, listening to it, for several minutes. It sounds like the bird and I are the same distance from the ground. My body is stiff from sitting so long in one place, not moving. My head aches because I have not slept. I can't remember the last time I slept. I want the pain to go away.

I hear someone moving on the floor above, know my sisters will be up soon, will wonder why they have been locked out of their bathroom. I open my eyes and peek through the crack between the wall and the stall door and see it is dawn. The sky is purple, gray and a little pink. The sun will be up within the next few minutes. It must be sometime after 6:00. I know that at this time of year, the sun doesn't come up until after then.

I stretch, knife still in hand, and get down to unlock the door, close the window. I shuffle slowly to the shower room, check each stall on the way, opening doors to make sure no one else is sitting on the back of a toilet, their feet propped up so I couldn't see them under the doors, cautious still, even though I try to reason with myself that I would know if someone were here. I would have heard them. But logic has nothing to do with it. I check the tub rooms again, the shower stalls, moving the curtains to make sure there is no one hiding there, either, unchain and unlock the door, peer out into the hallway to make sure no one is there. I hear my sisters as they wake up and move around their rooms.

I hurry around to the other side, unlock that door, peer out before sliding into the hall and rushing to my room. I freeze, my hand on the doorknob. I hear someone inside.

It's Kim. She's humming to herself, oblivious to the fact that she is both tone deaf and loud enough to wake Tara up next door. I hide my knife in the waistband of my shorts, hide the hilt with my shirt again, turn the knob. As usual, she has left it unlocked.

She looks over at me as I come in, says hey, goes back to gathering things for her shower. The clock on the shelf says it is 6:23. My phone is there on my bed where I left it. Every light in the room is turned on, Kim's habit before her shower so she can

minimize time between changing and putting on her makeup. She doesn't want to take the time later to turn on the lights. I can smell the burnt hair on her curling iron.

I lock the door behind her as she leaves the room with her shower caddy, her pink flip-flops slapping the floor and then her foot with each stop. I check first her closet, by the door, to make sure it contains only clothes and shoes, check mine, by the window, for the same. I need to know that I am the only person in this room. I need to be as sure of it as I am my name. This is the difference between certainty—safety—and paranoia.

I turn on my cell phone, wait for it to find a signal. There is a voicemail. I call it to see what it is.

It is the investigator. His voice is light, almost carefree. He has good news.

It is over, I'm safe.

I can go back to being a normal college coed.

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I am fascinated by trauma literature, by captivity narratives, by psychoanalysis. I live in a world where nothing exciting ever happens to me, and it's fantastic. It gives me more time to discover. I started my master's program for pleasure rather than necessity. I found out a year into it that it could pay off with a career shift at the small private college I was hired into almost six years ago, which is wonderful because my day job is admissions, which is sales, which means I have to be on the phone six hours a day and sitting in front of people for the other two, trying to tell them why spending over $30K for something they won't hold in their hands for another two years is the best decision they can make for themselves. I hate phones, and I find prolonged interaction with people exhausting and usually unworthy of my time, so I tend to spend my spare time

waiting for people to answer their phones stretched out under my desk reading theorists like Foucault or contemporary American novels or creative nonfiction. The desk faces the door, so to the rest of the office, it looks like I am away, somewhere down the hall or in the back getting a drink. They don't know I am hiding.

Under the desk I get just enough light from the hallogens and the tinted window to see what the building plans for the Panopticon originally looked like, enough room to stretch out on my back and lean against the drawer where I keep a stash of snacks to get me through the day. I can hear my supervisor come in and put another lead or report on my desk that I'm supposed to take care of, sign, and deliver back to her. She has no idea where I am.

When I'm not under my desk, I download books to my phone and hold it in my lap to read them when I should be sending emails and postcards, calling people who didn't show up for their financial aid appointment or who dropped off the face of the earth without telling me whether they really did plan to come to school in the fall or not. I scoot my chair as close to my computer as possible so the light on the screen can't be seen by anyone but me. By midafternoon my eyes are burning, my contacts are dry, my neck is killing me, my phone battery is dead, my daily contact manager in my database is ridiculously backed up because I haven't done anything productive in sales for over three days and I can't remember the last time I ate anything, but I am developing an understanding of why modern society is enamored with spectacle, even down to the body of the individual, and is it any wonder why I am identifying with the panoptic inmates of punative rehabilitation, with the secretive, uncertain characters of contemporary novels who have seen and done things they want to hide, who wonder if it is—any of it—real or

if they dreamt it, who are embarrassed and embittered about their experiences. I am bitter and resentful myself, childishly pouty, when people actually pick up their phones or show up for a scheduled appointment because they are interrupting my unprofessional behavior and I want more than anything to beg someone else to do my job for me so I can go back to not earning my paycheck. This alternates with my inherent desire to please everyone and cause minimal friction, to follow the rules implicitly because I am being paid to do a job and I reason with myself that it is only fair that I do it even though what I want most is to not have to do it at all and for all these people and their problems and their poor phone ettiquette to dissolve away into the background of the literature in which I have finally been able to make sense out of my life. I have won awards within the company for enrollment rates and low cancel rates out of those, and I resent every one of them because it was another hour or more out of my life when I wasn't learning about the changes in the punitive system from torture spectacle to rehabilitative spectacle, another hour where I was waiting to find out what happened to the girl held hostage in the back yard, to the slave trying to escape, to the family hiding from the Nazis. I come across phrases and theories I have never seen and close the database I'm supposed to be using to keep records and open the internet instead, charging through Google until I find an explanation, which then leads to more curiosity which leads to another search and four hours later I have still done nothing and it's time to go home.

I shut the computer down, pack a back pack that weighs as much now as it did when I was hauling gigantic world lit textbooks and lab assignments for my elective science classes across a mile of concrete during my undergrad years, for no other reason than I want to, I need to have all of these authors, their theories, their funny, sad,

harrowing, gut-wrenching lives, within arm's reach. I fold my sweater up that I fish out from under my desk from where I was using it to cushion my back earlier when I had muted the conference call and spent the entire time reading Alice Sebold rather than taking notes. As I leave, everyone makes comments about how quiet I've been, they've missed me, haven't seen me all day, didn't even know I was here. They see me only in this setting, rarely ever out in public, and they make jokes that if I didn't look exactly like I had when I was first hired, they wouldn't know the stranger in the front corner office. I smile, tell them to have a good night, shift my bag over my shoulder.

I pull in the drive of my house twenty minutes later, hear the dogs going crazy as I walk to the passenger side to get my back pack and purse, head to the porch to unlock the door and let them out. They've been trapped inside all day. I wave to my neighbor, Ken, who glowers disapprovingly at my dogs running loose in my yard, convinced when he's not watching that I have trained them to cross the property line and defecate in his yard. Had I thought of it and had the time, I probably would have. There are no leash laws in the county and it's the least I can do for him since he continues to shove pamplets under my door about the end of days and how I can save my soul by becoming a Jehovah's Witness like him even after I have asked him to please stop killing the trees, because it's surely annoying God that he continues to lay waste to Creation in order to convert someone who is clearly too stubborn to bow to his cause, that it can't be winning him any points with the Creator to keep murdering trees to win conversions considering they believe only a certain number of people can get into heaven and that those people are already chosen. That I only like to play lotteries I have a chance of winning, and I've had enough gloom and doom in my personal life, so if it's all the same to him I'd rather not

have any more. I say it with a smile on my face as I hand him back his bill of sale so he can use it for someone else. I'd hate for him to waste it. I make my way back to my door and can hear him mutter to himself, knowing he is probably shaking his head back and forth slowly so that his white hair doesn't fall out of place. I know I frustrate him, but his contentment with life isn't my responsibility. Besides, I've never seen him smile in five years, he's dour and sour in disposition, and he's ridiculous: he walks around the subdivision with a nine-iron in his hand for protection from an imaginary threat with his socks constantly pulled up to his knees, wearing loafers instead of athletic shoes. I enjoy the fact that he allows me this power over him, but I am too wrapped up in courtesy to be deliberately cruel.

It gets dark soon after I get home, usually, so I have to flip the switches in the house to turn on the lights. I drop my bags on the floor in the kitchen, kick off my shoes, one into the living room and one down the hall, let the dogs back in, feed them, make sure they have everything they need and I won't have to take care of them again for a couple of hours.

I make my way through the bedroom, around the pile of books that has sprung up as an outcropping of my nightstand, into my bathroom where I still check behind the shower curtain—a habit I haven't been able to shake. The only reason I don't check the closets is because they remain open pretty much all the time and aren't very big, so a quick glance as I walk by is enough. I dig my contacts out of my eyes, replace them with my glasses, and instead of sitting down to any of the towers of movies that I own but have never watched, I make a selection off one of the shelves in the living room, settle into the couch, read more about myself through other people's stories. I am not like any

of them, not really, but there's something there with which I identify. I am watching them live through these moments of their lives. They have given me permission to do so. To watch them is acceptable because we have made this agreement.

Every now and then I look over my shoulder down the hall, make sure it still looks the same. I have no idea why I do this. I am not afraid, haven't been for years. My heart does not speed up, my temperature does not increase, I don't have to work to control my breathing. I am hidden. Safe.

I know this. I enjoy the feeling of knowing this.

There is still a knife in the drawer in the living room table, still a baseball bat behind the bedroom door.

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